

In the Limelight: French Women from the *Banlieues* on Stage in Ahmed Madani's *F(l)ammes* (2017)

Abstract

This article considers how French theatre has contributed to debates on the condition of women living in the *banlieues* in a post-2015 context of terrorist attacks and a nation-wide state of emergency. Focussing on the play *F(l)ammes* (2017) by Ahmed Madani, which interrogates women's lived experiences, this article examines how theatre, drawing upon psychotherapeutic practices, engages with the complex interweaving of race, class and gender in marginalized French urban spaces. Using Nacira Guénif-Souilamas's analysis of women from the *banlieues* and Stuart Hall's work on the negotiation of multiple identities, this article suggests that *F(l)ammes* and the acting workshops from which it emerged eschew mass media representations of the French *banlieues* as violent, dangerous territories and offer an unusual, women-centred counter-discourse on the French nation.

Keywords

Banlieues, French theatre, women, identity, Madani

Introduction: staging the *banlieues*, the nation and postcolonial dramas

This article considers the relationship between the French *banlieues* and theatre, arguing that theatre can provide an artform which may serve simultaneously as social commentary as Gérard Noiriel's paradigm of the 'bricoleurs d'avenirs' proposes (2009, 86). Drawing more broadly upon the work of Nacira Guénif-Souilamas and Stuart Hall, this article then explores the representation of women's narratives on the stage in the French *banlieues* by analysing Ahmed Madani's 2017 play, *F(l)ammes*. This article suggests that the theatre has often been overlooked in theoretical and empirical accounts of *banlieues* cultural production but represents a powerful, cathartic medium which lends itself well to voicing little-heard narratives, particularly those of French women from the *banlieues* and in the process offers a valuable alternative to dominant media representations of the *banlieues* as a violent, lawless, menacing space.

Theatre in France has long held a central place in the cultural landscape as can be seen in the cultural institutions of the state-sponsored Comédie française and festival d'Avignon (Viala, 2009). Yet the representation of the *banlieues* on stage has often been overlooked by scholars, particularly in English speaking countries, who for the most part dismiss it as a minority genre of little consequence. Theatre dealing with the *banlieues* has never occupied 'centre stage' in theoretical and empirical accounts, overshadowed by studies of literature (Hargreaves 1991) and cinema (Tarr 2005) which tend to gloss quickly over theatre as a footnote in the history of the development in 'beur' culture. Only stand-up comedy and humour has drawn some sustained academic attention, focussing on work by Smaïn and Jamel Debouzze in particular (Halley 1994, Vanderschelden 2005, Beru 2011). Within a Republican nation, the term *banlieues* has long served as a byword for the troubled urban areas (at some distance from French city centres) which are associated

with economic deprivation, immigration and social unrest. In more recent times, the *banlieues* have also seen the spread of a ‘un nouveau discours où le ‘nous’ français apparaît comme opposé à ‘eux’ ‘islamistes’ (Noiriel, 2009: 61). The attack on the offices of satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015 and on various city centre locations in November of the same year, including the entertainment venue and former music hall, the Bataclan, made it clear that young people from the *banlieues* were linked to radicalisation and an unprecedented upsurge in violence (Kepel, 2015).

Symbolically, the troubled outposts of the *banlieues* have themselves been compared to a theatre on a number of levels. Events have approached the sensational and spectacular and have been transmitted and broadcast, sometimes live, to the nation. On a metaphorical level, Didier Lapeyronnie (2005) suggests that the *banlieues* have played host to enduring colonial and post/neo-colonial dramas which are repeatedly acted out and from which those living in the *banlieues* find it extremely difficult to extricate themselves, given the power of mechanisms and agents of the state. Summarizing Lapeyronnie, Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard and Sandrine Lemaire write:

[L]a banlieue est ainsi devenue un ‘théâtre colonial’ – et non une reproduction à l’identique de la situation coloniale – ou la domination subie enferme dans des catégories générales et des images dont il est quasiment impossible pour l’individu de s’extraire. Ces mécanismes néo-coloniaux ne sont peut-être jamais aussi présents que dans les relations entretenues par les représentants institutionnels avec les habitants des quartiers sensibles. (Bancel, Blanchard and Lemaire, 2005: 25)

Theatre is therefore crucial in terms of debates of national import and allows the holding up of a mirror to societal values and contemporary mores as Stephen Wilmer argues:

[T]heatre can act as a public forum in which the audience scrutinizes and evaluates political rhetoric and assesses the validity of representations of national identity. The theatre can serve as a microcosm of the national community, passing judgement on images of itself [...]. (in Wilmer, 2002: 2)

When it comes to the French *banlieues* in particular, Noiriel outlines how even if theatre is seen as ‘high’ culture, it is particularly apt as a means to allow social commentary on a given context as ‘le théâtre représente la société de son temps’ (Noiriel, 2009: 21). For the French *banlieues*, riven with ethnic and social tensions and the subject of a devalorizing external state and media discourse, theatre has the power to go beyond the mere reflection of the status quo. Indeed, theatre is potentially empowering and transformative and, according to Noiriel, has the possibility to ‘changer le regard des Français sur l’immigration’ (2009: 7). Noiriel demarcates two categories of contemporary theatre philosophies, those of the ‘créateurs de plateau’ as opposed to the ‘bricoleurs d’avenir’ (ibid.: 86) and aligns himself with the latter group.

In Noiriel’s paradigm the ‘créateurs de plateau’ are concerned above all with the production of plays for their own artistic sake - these artists therefore are not necessarily

engagés and do not speak of societal change in their work; whereas the ‘bricoleurs d’avenir’ who, as the term suggests, endeavour to exert some kind of influence over the environment in which they live. This is particular true of Ahmed Madani who can be classified as a ‘bricoleur d’avenir’ when he states: ‘Je ne vois pas l’intérêt tellement d’une œuvre artistique en soi. Je suis plutôt un artiste qui aime partager, qui aime échanger, qui aime dialoguer, et qui se nourrit de la réception de son œuvre’ (in Levasseur 2017). Well aware of the evolution in the representation of the *cités* on stage, Madani rejects the term ‘théâtre dit “de banlieue”’ (ibid) and reflects that:

Maintenant il y a des formes de théâtre qu’on appelle ‘théâtre du réel’, ‘théâtre documentaire’, qui sont en train de se développer, dans lesquels on va mettre des gens qui ne sont pas forcément des actrices et des acteurs sur la scène et puis on a va construire une œuvre, à partir de leur histoire et de leur singularités. Après, est-ce qu’il existe un théâtre dit ‘de banlieue’, qui se soit développé effectivement en banlieue? Je n’ai pas l’impression que ça se catégorise comme ça. (ibid.)

As Madani suggests, identifying genres in contemporary French theatre is a complex task as such works resist easy categorization but one overriding element is clear: there is a renewed and sustained interest in widening the artistic representation and involvement of France’s *cités*, as Madani explains:

Il y a un courant maintenant important dans le théâtre français, on s’aperçoit qu’il y a toute une partie de la communauté nationale qui n’est pas représentée donc il y a une volonté des écoles de théâtre, des responsables de grands théâtres d’accompagner, de favoriser la formation de cette jeunesse, et puis d’accéder au plateau. (ibid.)

Theatre and narratives of immigration, ‘Beur’ identity and beyond

Since 2005, there has been a growing number of theatre productions which take the *banlieues* as their setting.ⁱ Madani’s *F(l)ammes* (2017) is especially distinctive because it is characterised by his training in clinical psychology and the play’s exclusive focus on women from the *banlieues*. Madani’s theatre forms part of a wider desire to explore the *cités* further in a more complex fashion away from the stereotypical portrayals of the *banlieues*, which as Marie-Claude Taranger reminds us, are often portrayed on screen as ‘des tours, des barres, du béton, la proximité d’une grande ville (...) des ‘jeunes’ ‘immigrés, des heurts avec la police, voiture incendiées, commerces pillés et saccagés’ (1994, 60).

An admirer of the work of influential playwright and scriptwriter Armand Gatti, Madani provides an alternative vision of the *banlieues* and does so by emphasizing the importance of listening and talking as liberating and empowering experiences in his plays.ⁱⁱ Grounded in amateur theatre, his first production *La Tour* came in 1989 when he dealt with his native Mantes-la-Jolie and the demolition of the Rabelais tower, scenes captured in Dominique Cabrera’s documentary *Un balcon au Val-Fourré* (1990). Ever since the success of *La Tour*, Madani has continued to work in theatre, holding posts

overseas in La Réunion as Directeur du centre dramatique de l'Océan Indien. After his return to France in 2008 he then enjoyed a spell at the Ministère de la Culture / DRAC Ile-de-France and the Région Ile-de-France. Such roles and recognition show that Madani is therefore at once an outsider and insider. Memory plays an important role on Madani's work as his 2012 *Illumination(s)* shows through its focus on three generations of men from an immigrant background, all from Mantes-la-Jolie's *Val-Fourré*.

By focussing on women's narratives in *F(l)ammes*, theatre represents for Madani, an appropriate locus to examine social, economic and political issues and allows new discourses on the *banlieues* to be heard which are completely at odds with the sensationalised and marginalizing representations of these peripheral spaces and rejects well-worn projections of a schism between *banlieue* and centre, a point all the more pertinent after 2015 where, as Madani notes, 'il m'a semblé évident qu'on ne pouvait pas se mettre dans un rapport de confrontation, dans un rapport de violence à nouveau [...] Les femmes, leur rapport à la vie, ce n'est pas par la violence qu'elles s'imposent.' (in Levasseur, 2017). In *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1956), Erving Goffman advanced that encounters in the urban environment involve particular places which outwardly govern human interaction through a visible 'frontstage' and invisibly through a 'backstage', thus theorizing the way in which interpersonal relationships function. Also conscious of the fact that urban space in particular comprises places where representations matter, Madani is similarly concerned with the notion of the role of theatricality and performance in the construction of the self in the *banlieues*. For him, understanding these dynamics of performativity is central to deconstructing the dominant discourses on life in France's urban periphery. For Madani, the inhabitants of these spaces are:

[D]es produits de l'histoire, d'une certaine manière, qui produisent aussi des histoires. Evidemment dans ces quartiers, la tchatche, la manière de se présenter aux autres, il y a toute une théâtralité, dans les comportements, dans les attitudes, dans les manières de se présenter, dans les histoires presque mythomaniaques qui sont véhiculées. (in Levasseur 2017)

Madani's work was born out of the explosion of cultural creativity that heralded the 'beur' movement in the early 1980s, discovering the world of performing arts through his participation in a 'petite troupe de théâtre amateur dans la ville où je résidais [Mantes-la-Jolie]' (in Levasseur 2017). French 'beur' theatre had its roots in the radical political and artistic movement which sought to represent immigrants' experiences and in the process challenge racism. Rabah Aïssaoui (2009) analyses one such initiative in the example of the *Mouvement des Travailleurs Arabes* (2009: 171). Jeanne Le Gallic (2010) highlights Kateb Yacine's 1975 play *Mohammed prends ta valise* as a pivotal moment in 'the emergence of an immigration story using 'we'. Yet from 1980 onwards, cultural production shifted its focus to reflecting 'beur' experience, rather than that of first generation immigrants to France. The theatre scene was no exception to this and a number of 'beur' theatre companies were created such as the all-female troupe de théâtre de l'étang de beurre based in Port Le Bouc, near Marseille, formed in 1983, the same

year as the 'Marche des Beurs' (Chikh and Zehraoui, 1984: 27), an interesting example of women's involvement in the days of grass roots politically charged artistic activism.

Women from the *banlieues* and the quest for identity

Building on the legacy of 'beur' women's theatre groups in the 1980s, Madani presents an all-female cast in *F(l)ammes* 'parce qu'elles sont quand meme experts de leur jeunesse, des relations qu'elles ont avec les gens tres proches d'eux dans le quartier mais aussi avec les gens hors du quartiers' (in Levasseur 2017). In the immediate aftermath of the 2005 riots, Guénif-Souilamas (2006) raised the question of the role of women during the violence and challenged the notion that women were automatically passive and self-effacing in such times. She asked tellingly:

Où sont les filles, où sont les sœurs, où sont les femmes, où sont les mères ? (...)
Dès les premiers jours (...) [i]l paraît qu'il suffisait de lever les yeux pour le découvrir (...) Les garçons dans la fosse et les filles au balcon en train de compter les points et/ou les exhorter à rentrer chez eux, voilà qui reste indécidable.
(ibid.: 31)

After a series of rhetorical questions, the sociologist deployed the well-known metaphor of the balcony dating back to Shakespearian theatre to show how women are often depicted on the sidelines. Fahrad Khosrokhavar (2015) advanced the argument that young women are less prone to partaking in violent acts because they are more restricted by social, religious and cultural codes which govern their everyday lives. Furthermore he suggests that women have a better track record of educational success in part because of a drive to integrate into French society which then translates into a more successful active insertion into French citizenship. Despite this, young women from ethnic minority backgrounds living in the *banlieues* are subject to the same instances of racism as their male counterparts. Guénif-Souilamas has shown how such women face a 'triangle des dominations' (2000: 88). Whereas young men from the *banlieues* battle against racism and ageism, women come up against a 'triple alterity' of gender, generation and race which make them more inclined to fashion a 'identité ciselée', in the sense of carefully crafted, (ibid.: 88) in order to counter discourses which pigeon-hole the individual.

F(l)ammes aims to engage meaningfully with life in the *banlieues*, by foregrounding women's voices. While films on the *banlieues* such as Céline Sciamma's *Bande de filles* (2014) have often reaped critical acclaim and have also begun to put the emphasis much more firmly on women's lived experiences, theatre has also grown in its engagement with women from the *banlieues*. Indeed, *F(l)ammes* is based on interviews gathered through acting workshops and performances with women of different ethnic backgrounds aged between 18 and 28 living in neighbourhoods of Sevrans, Créteil, Mantes-la-Jolie but also Briançon and other council estates in other parts of the country. In this way, *F(l)ammes* published by Actes Sud in summer 2017, tells the stories of ten women from these socially and economically deprived areas, charting their lived experiences. While using fiction and fantasy is also an important part of the artistic realm for ethnic minorities, 'auto-fiction' has come to represent a significant way for ethnic minorities to access art.

Through a combination of performance techniques which incorporate spoken dialogue, dance and song, this group of women assert their agency and vocalize their demand for rights in a society where their voices are largely overlooked due to a combination of factors such as familial patriarchal structures and broader societal gender barriers which see men dominate the journalistic and cultural scene of the *banlieues*. The play's title is polysemic as the use of brackets to encircle the letter 'l' creates an 'L' sound, evocative of the French word 'aile', meaning wing. With the inclusion of the letter 'l', the title sounds like 'flammes', meaning flames with Madani asserting that 'derrière les flammes, il y a le feu, le feu de la vie aussi' (2016).ⁱⁱⁱ When the brackets are opened, out step the women. The play met with a positive reception^{iv} and has been performed over a hundred times throughout France and in Switzerland.

Madani's 'mise-en-scène' leads us into an all-female universe set in the France of the 2010 decade. The staging is minimal and props are limited to the ten chairs and a retro-style microphone. A giant screen suspended above the stage shows different tableaux suggesting nature and the elements (earth, forest, water) as well as France as can be seen the tricolour draped behind the women during the performance. The actors come very close to the audience as the small, intimate stage enables the spectators to get close and personal with the ten actors who at first speak in turn, individually. At the end of the first act, some of the actors step out in amongst the audience. Their appearance in the dimly-lit auditorium breaks the construct of the stage and performances and brings the public even closer to the performers. By gathering together a group of ten amateur actors in this way, Madani wanted to move away from having a central character, a kind of spokesperson. Each young woman tells her own personal story, mixing family anecdotes, bearing her hopes and fears in a pared-down, simple way. The lighting follows the actors' emotions and the action on stage. The costumes, such as they are, are the typical everyday-wear of young girls living in the *banlieues*: jeans, T-shirts and trainers for the most part and many of the girls wear make-up. As the costumes are simple, picking up the colours of the screen and the stage, the emphasis is then firmly on the spoken word and song and dance. The actors' texts which elaborate on their individual lived experiences is coupled with musical interludes which testify to the actors' cultural synthesising. Edith Piaf is spliced with Nina Simone, or even a Japanese song, tapping into the recent popularity of Japanese culture in France as seen in the quarter of a million visitors to the 2017 Japan Expo in the French *banlieues* at Villepinte.^v Dance and kinaesthesia underscore the indomitable energy and vitality that these young women from the *banlieues* possess in abundance.

Seeking to understand their identities, the young women in Madani's play all share the fact that their parents 'ont tous connu l'exil' (Madani, 2017: 66). This commonality is reinforced through the play's paratext as the cover shows the ten women against a lush, forest setting as though defiant and refusing to '[avoir] honte d'où tu viens' (Madani, 2017: 69). A brief survey of the characters' family backgrounds underscores the richness of this cultural heritage; the autobiographical elements provided are incomplete, fragmentary. Ludivine hails originally from Guinée Conakry but no longer lives in the cite du Pont-de Sèvres à Boulogne-Billancourt. Anissa A is twenty-eight, married with

two small children and wears the veil. Lauren's family origins can be found in the small Caribbean island of Guadeloupe and she is a fashion fanatic. Chirine is twenty and a karate enthusiast. She has an explosive temper, reminding us of Madani's statement that 'il y a un (2016)^{vi} en chaque femme'. As for Maurine, her family is from the Ivory Coast which explains her middle name of 'Gbagbohon'. Whilst initially so embarrassed by the hard to pronounce name that she seeks to remove it from her ID card, she then comes to accept it, embracing its protective power. Inès is something of a tomboy and lives in the working class Parisian suburb of Montreuil, an area which would once have been classified as a '*banlieue rouge*'. Haby spent her childhood in the sprawling Mantes-la-Jolie outside Paris; unable to cope with the daily struggles and harassment encountered by young women in the Val-Fourré council estate, she decides to move back in with her parents. Both Yasmina and Anissa K are from Algerian backgrounds. Yasmina's parents met in Algiers but Yasmina is still waiting for her 'grand amour'. Anissa K is very close to her grandmother who also lives in France and has had no contact with her father since the birth of her son. Dana is originally from Haïti. As a young child, she thought she was an alien like ET and suffers from a rather suffocating relationship with her mother.

Ten women, carefully chosen using strict criteria, reconnect with the storytelling tradition in such a way that they become raconteurs, able to deliver touching and funny personal stories on stage. In *F(l)ammes*, the play is demarcated in seven acts entitled 'autobiographie', 'l'embrouille', 'autobiographie suite', 'autoportrait suite bis', 'les mères', 'les cheveux' and, finally, 'un pays de rêve'. This seven-part division clearly underlines the importance which Madani attaches to story-telling. The different acts speak to a similar structure where each young woman presents herself, outlines her family background, reflects on her origins, shares her worries and fears. For example, the third actress in particular, Lauren Dulymbois, addresses from the outset the 'tribal stigmata' (Goffman, 1963: 14) which she feels affect her, as can be seen in her initial introductory speech dealing with the crux of debates on identity:

Je m'appelle Lauren Dulymbois
 Quand je dis mon nom au téléphone tout va bien
 Mais dès qu'on me voit on me fait les yeux ronds
 Parce que je n'ai pas une tête à m'appeler Lauren
 Et pas une tête à m'appeler Dulymbois
 Mes parents viennent de Guadeloupe
 La Guadeloupe c'est pas un pays
 C'est une région ultrapériphérique européenne
 L'Europe c'est grand faut pas croire. (Madani, 2017: 75)

Humour is here used as a way to neutralise the serious and widespread nature of stigmata which 'fixes' identity, to use Frantz Fanon's terms (1952: 93). Role play forms a central part of the performance as each woman no longer has to continue her role in daily life but can take on a new persona, trying different hairstyles, donning wigs and experimenting with costume. In this way, the women transform themselves and become someone else, another character, as Dana does when she sings a classic Nina Simone refrain from 'Ain't

got no, I got life' (Madani, 2017: 111) while Haby reveals a new self by removing her wig 'tout en restant immobile' (ibid.).

By allowing one to alter one's image, theatre opens up a new world away from the daily grind of *banlieues* life and in the process also serves as a form of therapy for these non-professional, amateur actors who for the first time find a place of expression. The texts came into being after a series of workshops, a kind of 'listening project' by Madani as the ten actors share their stories in a manner akin to a series of mini psychotherapy sessions. As Alain Marteaux contends, 'théâtre et thérapie ont toujours été très proches' (2012, 99) and through this technique, Madani suggests that the recounting of the self on stage alleviates suffering. Even though Madani employs a 'light touch' in his direction as can be seen in the minimal use of props and décor, any play which claims to 'give voice' to women runs the risk of criticism. Some may contend that via his directorial role, Madani instrumentalizes the young women's discourse and so serves as the paternal figure who is so very often absent from the women's narratives. As a playwright, Madani may face the claim that his production filters the women's stories in his bid to make them audible and, as a result, may even infringe the emancipation that he seeks to bring about.

Beyond Madani's interventions, theatre also has to answer the perpetual criticism of relevance and elitism as an obviously less 'popular' form than cinema. Who is the play for and who will see it? Madani recognises that theatre can bring into play 'une ségrégation géographique, une ségrégation culturelle, c'est à dire il faut un certain niveau de connaissance pour entrer dans le théâtre' but affirms that 'du coup c'est un spectacle qui a une rencontre avec tous les publics' (in Levasseur, 2017). Madani notes how the play met with particular success from the audiences with whom the play resonated most strongly, women from similar ethnic and socio-economic grounds to the women from *F(l)ammes*:

[L]e choc de la rencontre avec le public est impressionnant parce que il voit ces jeunes femmes différemment de la manière dont on les représente dans les medias, et donc elles voient des jeunes femmes qui leur ressemble qui ont des histoires qui pourraient être les leurs, et puis donc des jeunes femmes qui la question de la singularité est dépassée totalement parce que ce sont des spectatrices qui sont sur une scène et qui parlent à d'autres spectatrices, c'est ça qui se passe. (in Levasseur, 2017)

This identification is tangible and Madani's play is littered with references to the transformative power of theatre. The theatre here becomes a source of empowerment for these women whereby the act of bearing their narratives on stage is akin to a cathartic experience. This is certainly the case for Inès, the troop's basketball player who soon realises that her recruitment by the more prosperous club Vincennes is purely based on her physique and thus is accompanied by a sense of disappointment and questioning of self-worth. Yet Inès's introduction to the stage enables her to recover from this setback; the transition from the parquet of the basketball court to the boards of the stage allow her to assert her self:

On trouvait super cool qu'elle vienne nous chercher (...)
 Mais on a vite compris qu'elles avaient juste besoin de nous
 On étaient fortes (...)
 Et (...) remontaient le niveau de l'équipe
 En fait toute ma vie j'ai eu l'impression de faire pitié
 Et là aujourd'hui sur cette scène
 J'ai pas envie de faire pitié. (Madani, 2017: 92)

Experience on stage reveals the potential in a 'parole qui guérit' as psychologist Edmond Marc, an exponent of Gestalt therapy, puts it (2011, 49-57) and allows the individual subject to work towards a gradual coming to terms with the self in a liberating way. The symbolic power thus allows these women from France's peripheral spaces to assert their agency through a transformative process of storytelling. Women like Inès have often been rendered 'invisible' and silent in the social and political landscape by what Isabelle Clair and Virginie Descoutures term 'l'androcentrisme dominant' (2009: 9). Madani in his work endeavours to let women literally take centre stage as the female performers explore their 'condition féminine' in a France which is often inhospitable to *banlieues* women in ways which, while equally hostile, are perhaps more subtle than those facing men. The context of specular acts of violence (terrorism, riots) provides the women in the play with the opportunity to condemn the increasing racism and Islamophobia. In these 'temps troubles' (Madani, 2017: 67), Lauren explains how the climate has become increasingly vexatious and demeaning towards the *banlieues* residents, declaring:

Les Antillais doivent toujours prouver qu'ils sont français alors qu'ils sont Français depuis bien plus longtemps (...)
 Mais dans la rue ils sont des Noirs comme les autres
 Des potentiels sans-papiers'. (ibid.: 76-77)

whereas Haby emphasises how being a Muslim in France has never been harder in an altercation with her friends. Although we are far from the girl on girl physical violence prevalent in *Bande de filles*, the heated shoving and pushing nevertheless underscores the vehemence of the debate and brings up the issue of the feminisation of terrorism^{vii} and the impact that this has had on women who choose to wear the veil:

Quand t'es arabe c'est pire
 Pardon
 Vous savez bien
 Tu parles des attentats là
 Bien sûr. (ibid.: 87)

Anissa A maintains that she has never fallen 'victime de racisme' which is met with guffaws from the group as Ludivine reminds her pointedly that 'la dernière fois dans le train avec ton foulard, on t'a traitée de sans-papiers non?', highlighting how all the girls from the group face the same issues of racism, irrespective of the precise geography of their roots. The dichotomy between an us and them, a theme to which Noiriél (2009,

2015) frequently returns, is at the heart of the play as it explores what it means to be French today, mixing more general themes dating back decades as well as examining more specific themes relating to a post-2015 context in particular. A French ID card carries little weight as Chirine ironically outlines, using knowingly ‘unfeminine’ language via a telling idiomatic expression which refers to testicles, ‘On s’en bat les couilles de la carte d’identité, c’est bidon ça’ (Madani, 2017: 87). The young women go on to denounce the arbitrary nature of ‘Frenchness’ such as language, (ibid.: 85), surname (ibid.: 86), hair (ibid.: 88), nose shape (ibid.: 84) but of course, and especially, skin colour which relegates them to the status of second class citizenship, as Anissa A. reminds us:

Je ne sais pas moi
Une couleur de peau marron
Ou café au lait
Ou je ne sais pas comment on appelle ça
Mais ça n’inspire pas la France (ibid.: 82).

Through their conversations, the young women foreground the stigmatisation which they face and the complex, myriad ways in which they encounter it. Many of the women here prefer to see themselves as ‘infiltrateurs d’identités’, refusing to assign themselves to one particular category. Hall (1991, 47-48) shows how ‘identity is always in the process of formation (...) Always constructed through splitting. Splitting that which one is, and that which is the other’. This splitting of identities surfaces when Ludivine declares: ‘je me sens aussi bien dans un milieu bourgeois /que dans un milieu de quartier/ je suis devenue une sorte de caméléon’ (Madani, 2017: 71). This same fluidity is taken further by Lauren who straddles several, sometimes surprising identities, rejecting all forms of essentialist politics:

Je n’aime pas les clichés sur la banlieue
Je ne veux respecter aucune règle’.
Même au sein de la communauté Harajuku
Je peux mettre un pagne africain
Avec des collants à la mode japonaise
D’ailleurs je fais partie d’un sous groupe
De filles noires Harajuku qu’on appelle les Kawai Melanine
Et j’aime aussi m’associer avec les Afro punks
Je veux pas que les autres sachent qui je suis à l’intérieur
Je suis une mosaïque kaléidoscopique. (ibid.: 76)

The term ‘mosaïque kaléidoscopique’ encapsulates this multitude of affinities which even extend to Japanese culture, resulting in a powerful cocktail of fragmentary, competing and hard to define identities. This instability has secondary consequences in terms of perception and identification, a key point captured in the rhetorically powerful declaration:

Regardez-moi vous me voyez

Mais je ne suis pas telle que vous pensez que je suis
Je suis super visible pour être invisible. (ibid.: 76)

The young women here then negotiate and construct their own identity, borrowing and blending elements from other cultures, particularly from their family's cultural background, in order to counteract the forms of power and domination at work in the French Republic which tends to confine women like Madani's actors in pre-determined, stereotypical moulds. There is a strong identification with the *quartier* the women belong to which transcends ethnic compartmentalizations as shown by Dana who presents herself as a 'gargeoise pure race' (ibid.: 94), a new identity rooted in her neighbourhood of Gargeoise-les-Gonesses, near Roissy. Guénif Souilamas underscores the creativity of the process of reacting to this invisibility described by Lauren, noting how (2000: 15) 'les jeunes filles des cités sont loin d'être des actrices dociles (...) mais inventent des manières d'être inédites, entre auto-limitation et bricolage'. The experimentation that forms part of the quest for identity also extends to the depiction of the family relationships, especially between women. In Madani's *F(l)ammes*, young women are less relationally defined to men than in traditional *banlieue* cultural productions. Instead it is the relationships with mothers and grandmothers which take precedence as these female figures often come to stand in for the 'other' country which forms part of the identity puzzle pondered by the actors.

Relationships with men are bound up with the more well-known aspects of physical violence (abuse, rape) or symbolic violence (derision, rejection); the play also shows us how some of the actors adopt 'masculine' traits in order better to withstand assaults from men on their personhood as Inès's monologue evoking 'gender trouble' makes plain:

Quand j'avais dix-neuf ans je voulais être un garçon
Je me disais que c'était sûrement mieux (...)
J'avais des automatismes de défense
Je me sentais toujours agressée (Madani, 2017: 89, 91).

A collective women-only space is here a positive place where frank discussions are held even if family dynamics can prove problematic as the young women suggest when they relate some of their interactions with their mothers. In the act entitled 'Les mères', Madani's actors reveal some of these underlying tensions as the young women outline their visions of motherhood and, in some cases, their anxieties to avoid replicating the type of relationships they themselves experienced with their mothers: from Maurine who announces 'Bon moi j'adore les enfants' (ibid.: 104) to Yasmina who confesses 'Et moi je n'aime pas ça' (ibid.: 105); Dana who affirms that 'je n'aimerais pas leur transmettre ma peur du monde' (ibid.); Lauren who reflects 'Je ne sais pas comment ma mère a fait pour avoir autant d'enfants' (ibid.) to Anissa K who asserts how she would like to 'offrir à mon enfant la liberté qu'on ne m'a pas offerte' (ibid.) Each of the actors invokes the specificities of their own *parcours* with the maternal figure in their life, some of whom suggest that the lack of communication with the mother is a contributing factor in their quest for identity as they search for understanding and meaning. For example, Dana appears on stage regretting the lack of freedom as her mother 'l'appelle tout le temps'

(ibid.: 92). Dana cites the linguistic otherness of her mother's use of creole as well as the stifling nature of the relationship as factors which hinder their mother-daughter relationship and in turn affect her personal development:

Ma mère elle s'inquiète toujours pour moi
En général elle me parle en créole
Mais sur mon répondeur ses messages toujours les mêmes
En français (ibid.: 93).

Even more striking however is the experience related by Maurine whose feelings of alienation from her mother are all too clear. Maurine claims that she feels sad for her mother 'à qui elle n'en veut plus (ibid.: 79), and declares that her mother is incapable of understanding her. Nevertheless, Maurine reaffirms her need to 'avoir une vie pour moi' (ibid.: 79), 'une vie que je façonne' (ibid.: 79), even if for her family this act of asserting independence constitutes a 'trahison':

Je me sens différente (...)
Je me cherche
Le sentiment de rejet
Je l'ai ressenti beaucoup à l'extérieur mais
Je l'ai ressenti encore plus fort dans ma famille (ibid.: 79).

In the same way that the mother figure is an imposing and redoubtable figure, so too the grandmother is often an important female familial figure and also an avowed custodian of traditional values. Anissa K's case is an interesting one as she speaks at length about how her grandmother represented a rich cultural haven and a gateway to a hitherto little-known world. Her grandmother is therefore a mediator, initiating her granddaughter into some of the rites and rituals of the home culture through language, art and cultural practices. The grandmother transmits memories, stories and myths which without her input might fall into obscurity. Thus it is through Anissa K's grandmother's recounting of the symbolic African dish of *mahjouba* and its complex preparation, requiring patience and perseverance, that Anissa comes to realise how the passing on of multiple identities is fragile and at risk but has also contributed to her own rich cultural tapestry. Anissa K's monologue highlights the incompatibility between modern day Frenchness and ancestral practices:

L'histoire de deux femmes
L'une qui pendant des années après sa journée de ménage chez les autres
Se retrouvait seule dans la cuisine
Pour faire les mêmes gestes que sa mère
Pour faire les mêmes gestes que sa grand mère
Pour faire les mêmes gestes que son arrière-grand mère
Et l'autre sa petite-fille
Anissa qui veut dire la femme qui est allée à l'école
Au lycée et à l'université
Qui parle et écrit plusieurs langues

Et qui aime seulement faire des dessins dans l'air
Parce que la *mahjouba*
Elle préfère la manger que la faire (ibid.: 98).

In this reflection, Anissa shows the importance of familial memories of repetitive cultural practices which nevertheless highlight the gendered tensions between tradition and emancipation.

Conclusion

We have seen how portrayals of young women from the *banlieues* in theatrical productions such as *F(l)ammes* can provide a nuanced perspective on the lives of young women, far removed from the stereotypical and all too familiar sensationalised and negative iconography of the *banlieues* often prevalent in the public sphere. In contrast with such 'spectacular' representations, recalling Bourdieu's observation that the media and television in particular is driven by 'the search for the sensational and the spectacular' (1999: 19), *F(l)ammes* presents women's lives in the *banlieues* and upends suppositions that the *banlieues* are an inherently masculine space, governed and monitored by its male inhabitants. It also provides a useful counterpoint to more widely-known, (usually) cinematic representations of lived female experience such as Sciamma's *Bande de filles*. The play's importance lies principally in the fundamental shift of perspective that it offers and in so doing could be compared to other cultural initiatives which contribute to the visibility of ethnic minorities such as the work of opera singer Malika Bellaribi-Le Moal, a classically trained opera singer from Nanterre^{viii} who runs workshops with young people from the *banlieues* and the well-established Bondy blog,^{ix} featured by *Libération*.

Through a chorus of voices which reflect on questions on difference and belonging, the young actors deconstruct stereotypical narratives which construct the *banlieues* as inherently problematic and dangerous spaces. The stage allows these women to recount their personal trajectories, to share their experiences as each story allows the performer to relate their background, home life and problems. The touching 'warts and all', unfiltered 'autoportraits' reveal difficulties due to years of underinvestment in the *banlieues*, racism and political ambivalence but they also show a more positive, affirmative image of the *banlieues*, based on female support and solidarity. I have in this article tried to show how the very act of performance itself is a potentially liberating and emancipatory one, both in the sense of the individual women involved in the production of *F(l)ammes*, and more widely in the sense of moving cultural productions of the *banlieues* beyond sinister 'spectacle' of menacing otherness. Hall (1991: 47) observed how 'Identity is always constructed though ambivalence.' Indeed, he reminds us how we might 'Address people though the multiple identities which they have – understanding that those identities do not remain the same, that they are frequently contradictory, that they cross-cut one another [...].' (ibid.: 59) This is precisely what Madani as a 'bricoleur d'avenir' to take up Noiriel's term succeeds in doing, in his own modest way. From all this we can see how even if theatre has often been neglected in studies of *banlieues* cultural production, it

nevertheless represents an important creative outlet which foregrounds ‘other’ narratives, particularly those of French women from the *banlieues*. In this way it provides a powerful counter-discourse to the dominant media representations which sensationalize the *banlieues* as threatening sites of disorder and trouble. Against the backdrop of mainstream discourses of the new post-2015 dangers of the *banlieues*, Madani offers up a complex vision of the nexus of interweaving identities and through his play *F(l)ammes* puts women’s narratives squarely in the limelight in twenty-first century France.

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ⁱ These plays are worth highlighting in the context of this discussion and include: Xavier Durringer's *Les Déplacés* (2005), Roger des Prés's *Khaled Kelkal – une expérience de la banlieue* (2006), Mohammed Rouabhi's *Vive la France* (2008), Michel Azama's *Dissonances* (2012), Baptiste Amann's *Territoires (Nous sifflerons la Marseillaise...)* (2016), and Michel Simonot's plays, *L'Extraordinaire tranquillité des choses* (2005) and *Delta charlie delta* (2016).

ⁱⁱ For example, Madani's interview in *Hommes et Migrations* (1990: 33).

ⁱⁱⁱ See youtube interview in *Sortir* : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBV8u0F9nXQ> (accessed 4/1/2018).

^{iv} See dossier de presse for *F(l)ammes*'s: <http://madanicompanie.fr/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/FLAMMES-Revue-de-presse-1.pdf> (accessed 4/1/2018).

^v See 'Japan Expo 2017: les incontournables' (Le Figaro 7 July 2017)

^{vi} See youtube interview in *Sortir* : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBV8u0F9nXQ> (accessed 4/1/2018).

^{vii} For example, on November 2015 Hasna Ait Boulhacen was named 'Europe's first woman suicide bomber' (*The Independent* 20 November 2015).

^{viii} See 'Malika Bellaribi le Moal: ma cité va chanter' <http://www.lemonde.fr/festival/visuel/2016/08/12/ceuxquifont-malika-bellaribi-le-moal->

initie-les-quartiers-populaires-a-l-art-lyrique_4982146_4415198.html (accessed 4/1/2018).

^{ix} See Bondy blog: <http://www.bondyblog.fr/> (accessed 4/1/2018).